

## INFERNO

Like the wife who leaves the iron on  
and makes her husband turn the car around  
I awake and realize I have left a cigarette  
burning in my dream.

Over breakfast I can smell the fumes  
of the four-alarmer as it rages through  
my subconscious,  
sweeping down its paper tunnels,  
consuming every cellophane maze and castle.

The enormous appetite of fire that ate Rome  
and the library at Alexandria  
is devouring the catacombs of my deepest city  
where boogeymen grope in the smoke

and swallowing the volumes of childhood's  
dreads and lusts lined up on the once  
dark shelves.

No engine company can respond, no hose  
is long enough to reach those twisting corridors  
and dungeons full of hay where nightmares  
are chained,

to reach the great underground zoo  
full of colorful wild-eyed beasts  
whose choking I can almost hear.

In the future, sleep will be blank as a blackboard  
in mid-summer,  
a wide, pale, empty stage, devoid of sharks,  
uncles and blimps, all the fantastic nonsense  
of dreams

for heat is building up fast near the refineries  
of sex  
and the vast munition dumps of fear.

## SCHOOLSVILLE

Taking a long look over my shoulder, I realize  
that the number of students I have taught  
is enough to populate a small town.

I can see it nestled in a paper landscape,  
chalk dust flurrying down in winter.



The residents age but never graduate.  
The wives push baby carriages full of books.  
The men carry their notes in lunchpails.

On summer afternoons the old folk gather  
on park benches to sweat the final,  
and Saturday morning a group forms  
at the gas station to read disorganized essays.

Naturally I have forgotten their names  
but the boy who always had his hand up  
is an alderman and owns the haberdashery.

The girl who ducked assignments hangs out  
by the drugstore, chain-smoking, a pink  
comb in her back pocket.

All the creative writing students live  
in a meadow of wild flowers and practice the lute.  
Wherever they go, they make a big circle.

I, of course, am the mayor  
and occupy the big colonial at Main and Oak.  
Now and then someone knocks on the door  
with a term paper that is fifteen years late  
or a question about Yeats or double-spacing.

But usually they just walk past in silence  
or tiptoe sometimes up to a window to watch me  
bent over in a dim batch of lamplight  
correcting everything they have ever done.

-- Billy Collins

Scarsdale NY

#### POETRY BROKER

a young man of considerable promise  
has recently gotten into the racket  
of appropriating to himself  
the scheduling of poetry readings.

he does not understand  
that poetry seldom co-exists  
with power.